

The *New York Times* Bestselling Author

ELIZABETH HOYT

THE RAVEN PRINCE

“Hoyt’s writing is almost
too good to be true.”

—Lisa Kleypas,
New York Times
bestselling author



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THE
RAVEN
PRINCE



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For my husband, FRED, my own wild blueberry pie—sweet, tart, and always comforting.

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and staunch support; to my editor,
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crucial moments and persistently repeated,
“Believe!”

Chapter One



Once upon a time, in a land far away, there lived an impoverished duke and his three daughters...
—from *The Raven Prince*

LITTLE BATTLEFORD, ENGLAND
MARCH, 1760

The combination of a horse galloping far too fast, a muddy lane with a curve, and a lady pedestrian is never a good one. Even in the best of circumstances, the odds of a positive outcome are depressingly low. But add a dog—a very big dog—and, Anna Wren reflected, disaster becomes inescapable.

The horse in question made a sudden sideways jump at the sight of Anna in its path. The mastiff, jogging beside the horse, responded by running under its nose, which, in turn, made the horse rear. Saucer-sized hooves flailed the air. And inevitably, the enormous rider on the horse's back came unseated. The man went down at her feet like a hawk shot from the sky, if less gracefully. His long limbs sprawled as he fell, he lost his crop and tricorn, and he landed with a spectacular splash in a mud puddle. A wall of filthy water sprang up to drench her.

Everyone, including the dog, paused.

Idiot, Anna thought, but that was not what she said. Respectable widows of a certain age—one and thirty in two months—do not hurl epithets, however apt, at gentlemen. No, indeed.

"I do hope you are not damaged by your fall," she said instead. "May I assist you to rise?" She smiled through gritted teeth at the sodden man.

He did not return her pleasantry. "What the hell were you doing in the middle of the road, you silly woman?"

The man heaved himself out of the mud puddle to loom over her in that irritating way gentlemen had of trying to look important when they'd just been foolish. The dirty water beading on his pale, pockmarked face made him an awful sight. Black eyelashes clumped together lushly around obsidian eyes, but that hardly offset the large nose and chin and the thin, bloodless lips.

"I am so sorry." Anna's smile did not falter. "I was walking home. Naturally, had I known you would be needing the entire width of the throughway—"

But apparently his question had been rhetorical. The man stomped away, dismissing her and her explanation. He ignored his hat and crop to stalk the horse, cursing it in a low, oddly soothing monotone.

The dog sat down to watch the show.

The horse, a bony bay, had peculiar light patches on its coat that gave it an unfortunate piebald appearance. It rolled its eyes at the man and sidled a few steps away.

"That's right. Dance around like a virgin at the first squeeze of a tit, you revolting lump of maggot-eaten hide," the man crooned to the animal. "When I get hold of you, you misbegotten result of a diseased camel humping a sway-backed ass, I'll wring your cretinous neck, I will."

The horse swiveled its mismatched ears to better hear the caressing baritone voice and took an uncertain step forward. Anna sympathized with the animal. The ugly man's voice was like a feather

run along the sole of her foot: irritating and tantalizing at the same time. She wondered if he sounded like that when he made love to a woman. One would hope he changed the words.

The man got close enough to the bemused horse to catch its bridle. He stood for a minute, murmuring obscenities; then he mounted the animal in one lithe movement. His muscular thighs, indecently revealed in wet buckskins, tightened about the horse's barrel as he turned its nose.

He inclined his bare head at Anna. "Madam, good day." And without a backward glance, he cantered off down the lane, the dog racing beside him. In a moment, he was out of sight. In another, the sound of hoofbeats had died.

Anna looked down.

Her basket lay in the puddle, its contents—her morning shopping—spilled in the road. She must've dropped it when she dodged the oncoming horse. Now, a half-dozen eggs oozed yellow yolks into the muddy water, and a single herring eyed her balefully as if blaming her for its undignified landing. She picked up the fish and brushed it off. It, at least, could be saved. Her gray dress, however, drooped pitifully, although the actual color wasn't much different from the mud that caked it. She plucked at the skirts to separate them from her legs before sighing and dropping them. She scanned the road in both directions. The bare branches of the trees overhead rattled in the wind. The little lane stood deserted.

Anna took a breath and said the forbidden word out loud in front of God and her eternal soul: "Bastard!" She held her breath, waiting for a thunderbolt or, more likely, a twinge of guilt to hit her. Neither happened, which ought to have made her uneasy. After all, ladies do not curse gentlemen, no matter what the provocation.

And she was, above all things, a respectable lady, wasn't she?

By the time she limped up the front walk to her cottage, Anna's skirts were dried into a stiff mess. In summer, the exuberant flowers that filled the tiny front garden made it cheerful, but at this time of year, the garden was mostly mud. Before she could reach it, the door opened. A small woman with dove-gray ringlets bobbing at her temples peered around the jamb.

"Oh, there you are." The woman waved a gravy-smear wooden spoon, inadvertently flinging drops on her cheek. "Fanny and I have been making mutton stew, and I do think her sauce is improved. Why, you can hardly see the lumps." She leaned forward to whisper, "But we are still working on dumpling making. I'm afraid they have a rather unusual texture."

Anna smiled wearily at her mother-in-law. "I'm sure the stew will be wonderful." She stepped inside the cramped hall and put the basket down.

The other woman beamed, but then her nose wrinkled as Anna moved past her. "Dear, there's a peculiar odor coming from..." She trailed off and stared at the top of Anna's head. "Why are you wearing wet leaves in your hat?"

Anna grimaced and reached up to feel. "I'm afraid I had a slight mishap on the high road."

"A mishap?" Mother Wren dropped the spoon in her agitation. "Are you hurt? Why, your gown looks as if you've wallowed in a pigsty."

"I'm quite all right; just a bit damp."

"Well, we must get you into dry clothes at once, dear. And your hair—Fanny!" Mother Wren interrupted herself to call in the general direction of the kitchen. "We'll have to wash it. Your hair, I mean. Here, let me help you up the stairs. Fanny!"

A girl, all elbows, reddened hands, and topped by a mass of carrot hair, sidled into the hall. "Wot?"

Mother Wren paused on the stairs behind Anna and leaned over the rail. "How many times have I

told you to say, 'Yes, ma'am'? You'll never become a maid in a big house if you don't speak properly."

Fanny stood blinking up at the two women. Her mouth was slightly ajar.

Mother Wren sighed. "Go put a pot of water on to heat. Miss Anna will be washing her hair."

The girl scurried into the kitchen, then popped her head back out. "Yes, mum."

The top of the steep stairs opened onto a miniscule landing. To the left was the elder woman's room; to the right, Anna's. She entered her small room and went straight to the mirror hanging over the dresser.

"I don't know what the town is coming to," her mother-in-law panted behind her. "Were you splashed by a carriage? Some of these mail-coach drivers are simply irresponsible. They think the entire road is theirs alone."

"I couldn't agree with you more," Anna replied as she peered at her reflection. A faded wreath of dried apple blossoms was draped over the edge of the mirror, a memento from her wedding. "But it was a single horseman in this case." Her hair was a rat's nest, and there were still spots of mud on her forehead.

"Even worse, these gentlemen on horses," the older woman muttered. "Why, I don't think they're able to control their animals, some of them. Terribly dangerous. They're a menace to woman and child."

"Mmm." Anna took off her shawl, bumping her shin against a chair as she moved. She glanced around the tiny room. This was where she and Peter had spent all four years of their marriage. She hung her shawl and hat on the hook where Peter's coat used to be. The chair where he once piled his heavy law books now served as her bedside table. Even his hairbrush with the few red hairs caught in its bristles had long ago been packed away.

"At least you saved the herring." Mother Wren was still fretting. "Although I don't think a dunking in mud will have improved its flavor."

"No doubt," Anna replied absently. Her eyes returned to the wreath. It was crumbling. No wonder since she had been widowed six years. Nasty thing. It would be better in the garden rubbish pile. She tossed it aside to take down later.

"Here, dear, let me help you." Mother Wren began unhooking the dress from the bottom. "We'll have to sponge this right away. There's quite a bit of mud around the hem. Perhaps if I applied a new trim..." Her voice was muffled as she bent over. "Oh, that reminds me, did you sell my lace to the milliner?"

Anna pushed the dress down and stepped out of it. "Yes, she quite liked the lace. She said it was the finest she'd seen in a while."

"Well, I have been making lace for almost forty years." Mother Wren tried to look modest. She cleared her throat. "How much did she give you for it?"

Anna winced. "A shilling sixpence." She reached for a threadbare wrap.

"But I worked five months on it," Mother Wren gasped.

"I know." Anna sighed and took down her hair. "And, as I said, the milliner considered your work to be of the finest quality. It's just that lace doesn't fetch very much."

"It does once she puts it on a bonnet or a dress," Mother Wren muttered.

Anna grimaced sympathetically. She took a bathing cloth off a hook under the eaves, and the two women descended the stairs in silence.

In the kitchen, Fanny hovered over a kettle of water. Bunches of dried herbs hung from the black beams, scenting the air. The old brick fireplace took up one whole wall. Opposite was a curtain-

framed window that overlooked the back garden. Lettuce marched in a frilled chartreuse row down the tiny plot, and the radishes and turnips had been ready for a week now.

Mother Wren set a chipped basin on the kitchen table. Worn smooth by many years of daily scrubbing, the table took pride of place in the middle of the room. At night they pushed it to the wall so that the little maid could unroll a pallet in front of the fire.

Fanny brought the kettle of water. Anna bent over the basin, and Mother Wren poured the water over her head. It was lukewarm.

Anna soaped her hair and took a deep breath. "I'm afraid we will have to do something about our financial situation."

"Oh, don't say there will be more economies, dear," Mother Wren moaned. "We've already given up fresh meat except for mutton on Tuesdays and Thursdays. And it's been ages since either of us has had a new gown."

Anna noticed that her mother-in-law didn't mention Fanny's upkeep. Although the girl was supposedly their maid-cum-cook, in reality she was a charitable impulse on both their parts. Fanny's only relative, her grandfather, had died when she was ten. At the time, there'd been talk in the village of sending the girl to a poorhouse, but Anna had moved to intervene, and Fanny had been with them ever since. Mother Wren had hopes of training her to work in a large household, but so far her progress was slow.

"You've been very good about the economies we've made," Anna said now as she worked the third lather into her scalp. "But the investments Peter left us aren't doing as well as they used to. Our income has decreased steadily since he passed away."

"It's such a shame he left us so little to live on," Mother Wren said.

Anna sighed. "He didn't mean to leave such a small sum. He was a young man when the fever took him. I'm sure had he lived, he would've built up the savings substantially."

In fact, Peter had improved their finances since his own father's death shortly before their marriage. The older man had been a solicitor, but several ill-advised investments had landed him deeply in debt. After the wedding, Peter had sold the house he had grown up in to pay off the debts and moved his new bride and widowed mother into the much-smaller cottage. He had been working as a solicitor when he'd become ill and died within the fortnight.

Leaving Anna to manage the little household on her own. "Rinse, please."

A stream of chilly water poured over her nape and head. She felt to make sure no soap remained, then squeezed the excess water from her hair. She wrapped a cloth around her head and glanced up. "I think I should find a position."

"Oh, dear, surely not that." Mother Wren plopped down on a kitchen chair. "Ladies don't work."

Anna felt her mouth twitch. "Would you prefer I remain a lady and let us both starve?"

Mother Wren hesitated. She appeared to actually debate the question.

"Don't answer that," Anna said. "It won't come to starvation anyway. However, we do need to find a way to bring some income into the household."

"Perhaps if I were to produce more lace. Or, or I could give up meat entirely," her mother-in-law said a little wildly.

"I don't want you to have to do that. Besides, Father made sure I had a good education."

Mother Wren brightened. "Your father was the best vicar Little Battleford ever had, God rest his soul. He *did* let everyone know his views on the education of children."

"Mmm." Anna took the cloth off her head and began combing out her wet hair. "He made sure I learned to read and write and do figures. I even have a little Latin and Greek. I thought I'd look

tomorrow for a position as a governess or companion.”

“~~Old Mrs. Lester is almost blind. Surely her son-in-law would hire you to read—~~” Mother Wren stopped.

Anna became aware at the same time of an acrid scent in the air. “Fanny!”

The little maid, who had been watching the exchange between her employers, yelped and ran to the pot of stew over the fire. Anna groaned.

Another burned supper.

FELIX HOPPLE PAUSED before the Earl of Swartingham’s library door to take stock of his appearance. His wig, with two tight sausage curls on either side, was freshly powdered in a becoming lavender shade. His figure—quite svelte for a man of his years—was highlighted by a puce waistcoat edged with vining yellow leaves. And his hose had alternating green and orange stripes, handsome without being ostentatious. His toilet was perfection itself. There was really no reason for him to hesitate outside the door.

He sighed. The earl had a disconcerting tendency to growl. As estate manager of Ravenhill Abbey Felix had heard that worrisome growl quite a bit in the last two weeks. It’d made him feel like one of those unfortunate native gentlemen one read about in travelogues who lived in the shadows of large, ominous volcanoes. The kind that might erupt at any moment. Why Lord Swartingham had chosen to take up residence at the Abbey after years of blissful absence, Felix couldn’t fathom, but he had the sinking feeling that the earl intended to remain for a very, very long time.

The steward ran a hand down the front of his waistcoat. He reminded himself that although the matter he was about to bring to the earl’s attention was not pleasant, it could in no way be construed as his own fault. Thus prepared, he nodded and tapped at the library door.

There was a pause and then a deep, sure voice rasped, “Come.”

The library stood on the west side of the manor house, and the late-afternoon sun streamed through the large windows that took up nearly the entire outside wall. One might think this would make the library a sunny, welcoming room, but somehow the sunlight was swallowed by the cavernous space soon after it entered, leaving most of the room to the domain of the shadows. The ceiling—two stories high—was wreathed in gloom.

The earl sat behind a massive, baroque desk that would’ve dwarfed a smaller man. Nearby, a fire attempted to be cheerful and failed dismally. A gigantic, brindled dog sprawled before the hearth as if dead. Felix winced. The dog was a mongrel mix that included a good deal of mastiff and perhaps some wolfhound. The result was an ugly, mean-looking canine he tried hard to avoid.

He cleared his throat. “If I could have a moment, my lord?”

Lord Swartingham glanced up from the paper in his hand. “What is it now, Hopple? Come in, come in, man. Sit down while I finish this. I’ll give you my attention in a minute.”

Felix crossed to one of the armchairs before the mahogany desk and sank into it, keeping an eye on the dog. He used the reprieve to study his employer for an idea of his mood. The earl scowled at the page in front of him, his pockmarks making the expression especially unattractive. Of course, this was not necessarily a bad sign. The earl habitually scowled.

Lord Swartingham tossed aside the paper. He took off his half-moon reading glasses and threw his considerable weight back in his chair, making it squeak. Felix flinched in sympathy.

“Well, Hopple?”

“My lord, I have some unpleasant news that I hope you will not take too badly.” He smiled

tentatively.

The earl stared down his big nose without comment.

Felix tugged at his shirt cuffs. “The new secretary, Mr. Tootleham, had word of a family emergency that forced him to hand in his resignation rather quickly.”

There was still no change of expression on the earl’s face, although he did begin to drum his fingers on the chair arm.

Felix spoke more rapidly. “It seems Mr. Tootleham’s parents in London have become bedridden by a fever and require his assistance. It is a very virulent illness with sweating and purging, qu-quite contagious.”

The earl raised one black eyebrow.

“I-in fact, Mr. Tootleham’s two brothers, three sisters, his elderly grandmother, an aunt, and the family cat have all caught the contagion and are utterly unable to fend for themselves.” Felix stopped and looked at the earl.

Silence.

Felix wrestled valiantly to keep from babbling.

“The cat?” Lord Swartingham snarled softly.

Felix started to stutter a reply but was interrupted by a bellowed obscenity. He ducked with newly practiced ease as the earl picked up a pottery jar and flung it over Felix’s head at the door. It hit with tremendous crash and a tinkle of falling shards. The dog, apparently long used to the odd manner in which Lord Swartingham vented his spleen, merely sighed.

Lord Swartingham breathed heavily and pinned Felix with his coal-black eyes. “I trust you have found a replacement.”

Felix’s neckcloth felt suddenly tight. He ran a finger around the upper edge. “Er, actually, my lord, although, of course, I’ve searched qu-quite diligently, and indeed, all the nearby villages have been almost scoured, I haven’t—” He gulped and courageously met his employer’s eye. “I’m afraid I haven’t found a new secretary yet.”

Lord Swartingham didn’t move. “I need a secretary to transcribe my manuscript for the series of lectures given by the Agrarian Society in four weeks,” he enunciated awfully. “Preferably one who will stay more than two days. Find one.” He snatched up another sheet of paper and went back to reading.

The audience had ended.

“Yes, my lord.” Felix bounced nervously out of the chair and scurried toward the door. “I’ll start looking right away, my lord.”

Lord Swartingham waited until Felix had almost reached the door before rumbling, “Hopple.”

On the point of escape, Felix guiltily drew back his hand from the doorknob. “My lord?”

“You have until the morning after tomorrow.”

Felix stared at his employer’s still-downcast head and swallowed, feeling rather like that Hercules fellow must have on first seeing the Augean stables. “Yes, my lord.”

EDWARD DE RAAF, the fifth Earl of Swartingham, finished reading the report from his North Yorkshire estate and tossed it onto the pile of papers, along with his spectacles. The light from the window was fading fast and soon would be gone. He rose from his chair and went to look out. The dog got up, stretched, and padded over to stand beside him, bumping at his hand. Edward absently stroked its ear.

This was the second secretary to decamp in the dark of night in so many months. One would think

he was a dragon. Every single secretary had been more mouse than man. Show a little temper, a raise voice, and they scurried away. If even one of his secretaries had half the pluck of the woman he had nearly run down yesterday... His lips twitched. He hadn't missed her sarcastic reply to his demand on why she was in the road. No, that madam stood her ground when he blew his fire at her. A pity his secretaries couldn't do the same.

He glowered out the dark window. And then there was this other nagging... disturbance. His boyhood home was not as he remembered it.

True, he was a man now. When he had last seen Ravenhill Abbey, he'd been a stripling youth mourning the loss of his family. In the intervening two decades, he had wandered from his northern estates to his London town house, but somehow, despite the time, those two places had never felt like home. He had stayed away precisely because the Abbey would never be the same as when his family had lived here. He'd expected some change. But he'd not been prepared for this dreariness. Nor the awful sense of loneliness. The very emptiness of the rooms defeated him, mocking him with the laughter and light that he remembered.

The family that he remembered.

The only reason he persisted in opening up the mansion was because he hoped to bring his new bride here—his prospective new bride, pending the successful negotiation of the marital contract. He wasn't going to repeat the mistakes of his first, short marriage and attempt to settle elsewhere. Back then, he'd tried to make his young wife happy by remaining in her native Yorkshire. It hadn't worked. In the years since his wife's untimely death, he'd come to the conclusion that she wouldn't have been happy anywhere they'd chosen to make their home.

Edward pushed away from the window and strode toward the library doors. He would start as he meant to; go on and live at the Abbey; make it a home again. It was the seat of his earldom and where he meant to replant his family tree. And when the marriage bore fruit, when the halls once again rang with children's laughter, surely then Ravenhill Abbey would feel alive again.

Chapter Two



Now, all three of the duke's daughters were equally fair. The eldest had hair of deepest pitch that shone with blue-black lights; the second had fiery locks that framed a milky-white complexion; and the youngest was golden, both of face and form, so that she seemed bathed in sunlight. But of these three maidens, only the youngest was blessed with her father's kindness. Her name was Aurea....

—from *The Raven Prince*

Who would have guessed that there was such a paucity of jobs for genteel ladies in Little Battleford? Anna had known that it wouldn't be easy to find a position when she left the cottage this morning, but she'd started with some hope. All she required was a family with illiterate children needing a governess or an elderly lady in want of a wool-winder. Surely this was not too much to expect?

Evidently it was.

It was midafternoon now. Her feet ached from trudging up and down muddy lanes, and she didn't have a position. Old Mrs. Lester had no love of literature. Her son-in-law was too parsimonious to hire a companion in any case. Anna called round on several other ladies, hinting that she might be open to a position, only to find they either could not afford a companion or simply did not want one.

Then she'd come to Felicity Clearwater's home.

Felicity was the third wife of Squire Clearwater, a man some thirty years older than his bride. The squire was the largest landowner in the county besides the Earl of Swarthingham. As his wife, Felicity clearly considered herself the preeminent social figure in Little Battleford and rather above the humble Wren household. But Felicity had two girls of a suitable age for a governess, so Anna had called on her. She'd spent an excruciating half hour feeling her way like a cat walking on sharp pebbles. When Felicity had caught on to Anna's reason for visiting, she'd smoothed a pampered hand over her already immaculate coiffure. Then she'd sweetly enquired about Anna's musical knowledge.

The vicarage had never run to a harpsichord when Anna's family had occupied it. A fact Felicity knew very well, since she'd called there on several occasions as a girl.

Anna had taken a deep breath. "I'm afraid I don't have any musical ability, but I do have a bit of Latin and Greek."

Felicity had flicked open a fan and tittered behind it. "Oh, I do apologize," she'd said when she'd recovered. "But my girls will not be learning anything so masculine as Latin or Greek. It's rather unbecoming in a lady, don't you think?"

Anna had grit her teeth, but managed a smile. Until Felicity had suggested she try the kitchen to see if Cook needed a new scullery maid. Things had gone downhill from there.

Anna sighed now. She might very well end up a scullery maid or worse, but not at Felicity's house. Time to head home.

Rounding the corner at the ironmonger's, she just managed to avoid a collision with Mr. Felix Hopple hurrying in the other direction. She skidded to a halt inches shy of the Ravenhill steward's chest. A packet of needles, some yellow embroidery floss, and a small bag of tea for Mother Wren slid to the ground from her basket.

"Oh, do excuse me, Mrs. Wren," the little man gasped as he bent to retrieve the items. "I'm afraid"

was not minding where my feet carried me.”

“That’s quite all right.” Anna eyed the violet and crimson striped waistcoat he wore and blinked. *Good Lord*. “I hear the earl is finally in residence at Ravenhill. You must be quite busy.”

The village gossips were all abuzz at the mysterious earl’s reappearance in the neighborhood after so many years, and Anna was just as curious as everyone else. In fact, she was beginning to wonder about the identity of the ugly gentleman who had so nearly run her down the day before....

Mr. Hopple heaved a sigh. “I’m afraid so.” He pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow. “I am on the hunt for a new secretary for his lordship. It is not an easy search. The last man I interviewed kept blotting his paper, and I was not at all sure of his ability to spell.”

“That would be a problem in a secretary,” Anna murmured.

“Indeed.”

“If you find no one today, do remember that there will be plenty of gentlemen at church on Sunday morning,” Anna said. “Perhaps you will find someone there.”

“I’m afraid that will do me no good. His lordship stated he must have a new secretary by tomorrow morning.”

“So soon?” Anna stared. “That is very little time.” A thought dawned.

The steward was trying without success to wipe the mud from the packet of needles.

“Mr. Hopple,” she said slowly, “did the earl say he required a *male* secretary?”

“Well, no,” Mr. Hopple replied absently, still involved with the packet. “The earl simply instructed me to hire another secretary, but what other—” He stopped suddenly.

Anna straightened her flat straw hat and smiled meaningfully. “As a matter of fact, I’ve been thinking lately about how much excess time I have. You may not be aware, but I’ve a very clear hand. And I do know how to spell.”

“You are not suggesting...?” Mr. Hopple looked stunned, rather like a gaffed halibut in a lavender wig.

“Yes, I do suggest.” Anna nodded. “I think it will be just the thing. Shall I report to Ravenhill at nine or ten o’clock tomorrow?”

“Er, nine o’clock. The earl rises early. B-but really, Mrs. Wren—” Mr. Hopple stuttered.

“Yes, really, Mr. Hopple. There. It is all settled. I shall see you tomorrow at nine o’clock.” Anna patted the poor man on the sleeve. He really did not look well. She turned to go but stopped when she remembered a very important point. “One more thing. What wage is the earl offering?”

“The wage?” Mr. Hopple blinked. “Well, er, the earl was paying his last secretary three pounds a month. Will that be all right?”

“Three pounds.” Anna’s lips moved as she silently repeated the words. It was suddenly a glorious day in Little Battleford. “That will do nicely.”

“AND NO DOUBT MANY of the upper chambers will need to be aired and perhaps painted as well. Have you got that, Hopple?” Edward leapt down the last three steps in front of Ravenhill Abbey and strode toward the stables, the late-afternoon sun warm on his back. The dog, as usual, followed at his heels.

There was no reply.

“Hopple? Hopple!” He pivoted, his boots crunching on the gravel, and glanced behind him.

“A moment, my lord.” The steward was just starting down the front steps. He seemed out of breath. “I’ll be there... in... a... moment.”

Edward waited, foot tapping, until Hopple caught up, then he continued around the back. Here the

gravel gave way to worn cobblestone in the courtyard. "Have you got that about the upper chambers?"

"Er, the upper chambers, my lord?" the little man wheezed as he scanned the notes in his hand.

"Have the housekeeper air them," Edward repeated slowly. "Check to see if they need painting. Do try to keep up, man."

"Yes, my lord," Hopple muttered, scribbling.

"I trust you have found a secretary."

"Er, well..." The steward peered at his notes intently.

"I did tell you I needed one by tomorrow morn."

"Yes, indeed, my lord, and in fact I do have a-a person who I think may very well—"

Edward halted before the massive double doors to the stables. "Hopple, do you have a secretary for me or not?"

The steward looked alarmed. "Yes, my lord. I do think one could say that I have found a secretary."

"Then why not say so?" He frowned. "Is something wrong with the man?"

"N-no, my lord." Hopple smoothed his terrible purple waistcoat. "The secretary will, I think, be quite satisfactory as a, well, as a secretary." His eyes were fixed on the horse weather vane atop the stable roof.

Edward found himself inspecting the weather vane. It squeaked and revolved slowly. He tore his gaze from it and looked down. The dog sat beside him, head cocked, also staring at the weather vane.

Edward shook his head. "Good. I will be absent tomorrow morning when he arrives." They walked from the late-afternoon sunshine into the gloom of the stables. The dog trotted ahead, sniffing in corners. "So you will need to show him my manuscript and generally instruct him as to his duties." He turned. Was it his imagination or did Hopple look relieved?

"Very good, my lord," the steward said.

"I will be traveling up to London early tomorrow and shall be gone through the rest of the week. By the time I return, he should have transcribed the papers I have left."

"Indeed, my lord." The steward was definitely beaming.

Edward eyed him and snorted. "I shall be looking forward to meeting my new secretary when I return."

Hopple's smile dimmed.

RAVENHILL ABBEY WAS a rather daunting sort of place, Anna thought as she tramped up the drive to the manor the next morning. The walk from the village to the estate was almost three miles, and her calves were beginning to ache. Fortunately, the sun shone cheerily. Ancient oaks bordered the drive, a change from the open fields along the lane from Little Battleford. The trees were so old that two horsemen could ride abreast through the spaces between them.

She rounded a corner, gasped, and halted. Daffodils dotted the tender green grass beneath the trees. The branches above wore only a fuzz of new leaves, and the sunshine broke through with hardly any impediment. Each yellow daffodil shone translucent and perfect, creating a fragile fairyland.

What sort of man would stay away from this for almost two decades?

Anna remembered tales of the great smallpox epidemic that had decimated Little Battleford in the years before her parents moved into the vicarage. She knew the present earl's family had all died from the disease. Even so, wouldn't he have at least visited in the intervening years?

She shook her head and continued. Just past the daffodil field, the copse opened up and she could see Ravenhill clearly. It stood four stories high, built of gray stone in the classic style. A single centr

entrance on the first floor dominated the façade. From it, twin curving staircases descended to ground level. In a sea of open fields, the Abbey was an island, alone and arrogant.

Anna started on the long approach to Ravenhill Abbey, her confidence fading the closer she got. That front entrance was simply too imposing. She hesitated a moment when she neared the Abbey, then veered around the corner. Just past the corner, she saw the servants' entrance. This door, too, was tall and double, but at least she didn't have to mount granite steps to reach it. Taking a deep breath, she tugged on the big brass knob and walked directly into the huge kitchen.

A large woman with white-blond hair stood at a massive central table. She kneaded dough, her arms elbow-deep in an earthenware bowl the size of a kettle. Strands of hair came down from the bun at the top of her head and stuck to the sweat on her red cheeks. The only other people in the room were a scullery maid and a bootblack boy. All three turned to stare at her.

The fair-haired woman—surely the cook?—held up floury arms. “Aye?”

Anna raised her chin. “Good morning. I'm the earl's new secretary, Mrs. Wren. Do you know where Mr. Hopple might be?”

Without taking her eyes from Anna, the cook yelled to the bootblack boy, “You there, Danny. Go and fetch Mr. Hopple and tell him Mrs. Wren is here in the kitchen. Be quick, now.”

Danny dashed out of the kitchen, and the cook turned back to her dough.

Anna stood waiting.

The scullery maid by the massive fireplace stared, absently scratching her arm. Anna smiled at her. The girl quickly averted her eyes.

“Ain't never heard of a lady secretary before.” The cook kept her eyes on her hands, swiftly working the dough. She expertly flipped the whole mass onto the table and rolled it into a ball, the muscles on her forearms flexing. “Have you met his lordship, then?”

“We've never been introduced,” Anna said. “I discussed the position with Mr. Hopple, and he had no qualms about me becoming the earl's secretary.” At least Mr. Hopple hadn't *voiced* any qualms, she added mentally.

The cook grunted without looking up. “That's just as well.” She rapidly pinched off walnut-sized bits of dough and rolled them into balls. A pile formed. “Bertha, fetch me that tray.”

The scullery maid brought over a cast-iron tray and lined up the balls on it in rows. “Gives me the chilly trembles, he does, when he shouts,” she whispered.

The cook cast a jaundiced eye on the maid. “The sound of hoot owls gives you the chilly trembles. The earl's a fine gentleman. Pays us all a decent wage and gives us regular days off, he does.”

Bertha bit her lower lip as she carefully positioned each ball. “He's got a terrible sharp tongue. Perhaps that's why Mr. Tootleham left so—” She seemed to realize the cook was glaring at her and abruptly shut her mouth.

Mr. Hopple's entrance broke the awkward silence. He wore an alarming violet waistcoat, embroidered all over with scarlet cherries.

“Good morning, good morning, Mrs. Wren.” He darted a glance at the watching cook and scullery maid and lowered his voice. “Are you quite sure, er, about this?”

“Of course, Mr. Hopple.” Anna smiled at the steward in what she hoped was a confident manner. “I am looking forward to making the acquaintance of the earl.”

She heard the cook humph behind her.

“Ah.” Mr. Hopple coughed. “As to that, the earl has journeyed to London on business. He often spends his time there, you know,” he said in a confiding tone. “Meeting with other learned gentlemen. The earl is quite an authority on agricultural matters.”

Disappointment shot through her. "Shall I wait for his return?" she asked.

"No, no. No need," Mr. Hopple said. "His lordship left some papers for you to transcribe in the library. I'll just show you there, shall I?"

Anna nodded and followed the steward out of the kitchen and up the back stairs into the main hallway. The floor was pink and black marble parquet, beautifully inlaid, although a bit hard to see in the dim light. They came to the main entrance, and she stared at the grand staircase. Good Lord, it was huge. The stairs led up to a landing the size of her kitchen and then parted into two staircases arching away into the dark upper floors. How on earth did one man rattle around in such a house, even if he did have an army of servants?

Anna became aware that Mr. Hopple was speaking to her.

"The last secretary and, of course, the one before him worked in their own study under the stairs," the little man said. "But the room there is rather bleak. Not at all fitting a lady. So I thought it best that you be set up in the library where the earl works. Unless," Mr. Hopple inquired breathlessly, "you would prefer to have a room of your own?"

The steward turned to the library and held the door for Anna. She walked inside and then stopped suddenly, forcing Mr. Hopple to step around her.

"No, no. This will do very nicely." She was amazed at how calm her voice sounded. So many books! They lined three sides of the room, marching around the fireplace and extending to the vaulted ceiling. There must be over a thousand books in this room. A rather rickety ladder on wheels stood in the corner, apparently for the sole purpose of putting the volumes within reach. Imagine owning all these books and being able to read them whenever one fancied.

Mr. Hopple led her to a corner of the cavernous room where a massive, mahogany desk stood. Opposite it, several feet away, was a smaller, rosewood desk.

"Here we are, Mrs. Wren," he said enthusiastically. "I've set out everything I think you might need: paper, quills, ink, wipers, blotting paper, and sand. This is the manuscript the earl would like copied." He indicated a four-inch stack of untidy paper. "There is a bellpull in the far corner, and I'm sure Cook would be happy to send up tea and any light refreshments you might like. Is there anything else you desire?"

"Oh, no. This is all fine." Anna clasped her hands before her and tried not to look overwhelmed.

"No? Well, do let me know if you need more paper, or anything else for that matter." Mr. Hopple smiled and shut the door behind him.

She sat at the elegant little desk and reverently ran a finger over the polished inlay. Such a pretty piece of furniture. She sighed and picked up the first page of the earl's manuscript. A bold hand, heavily slanted to the right, covered the page. Here and there, sentences were scratched out and alternative ones scrawled along the margins with many arrows pointing to where they should go.

Anna began copying. Her own handwriting flowed small and neat. She paused now and again as she tried to decipher a word. The earl's handwriting was truly atrocious. After a while, though, she began to get used to his looping Ys and dashed Rs.

At a little past noon, Anna laid aside her quill and rubbed at the ink on her fingertips. Then she rose and tentatively yanked at the bellpull in the corner. It was silent, but presumably a bell rang somewhere to summon someone to bring her a cup of tea. She glanced at the row of books near the pull. They were heavy, embossed tomes with Latin names. Curious, she drew one out. As she did so, a slim volume fell to the floor with a thud. Anna quickly bent to pick it up, glancing guiltily at the door. No one had yet responded to the bellpull.

She turned back to the book in her hands. It was bound in red morocco leather, buttery soft to the

touch, and was without tittle. The sole embellishment was an embossed gold feather on the lower right corner of the cover. She frowned and replaced her first choice, then carefully opened the red leather book. Inside, on the flyleaf, was written in a childish hand, *Elizabeth Jane de Raaf, her book.*

“Yes, ma’am?”

Anna almost dropped the red book at the young maid’s voice. She hastily replaced it on the shelf and smiled at the maid. “I wonder if I might have some tea?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The maid bobbed and left without further comment.

Anna glanced again at Elizabeth’s book but decided circumspection was the better part of valor and returned to her desk to await the tea.

At five o’clock, Mr. Hopple rushed back into the library. “How was your first day? Not too strenuous, I hope?” He picked up the stack of completed papers and glanced through the first several. “These look very well. The earl will be pleased to get them off to the printers.” He sounded relieved.

Anna wondered if he had spent the day worrying about her abilities. She gathered her things and, with a last inspection of her desktop to make sure all was in order, bid Mr. Hopple good evening and set off home.

Mother Wren pounced the moment Anna arrived at the little cottage and bombarded her with anxious questions. Even Fanny looked at her as if working for the earl were terribly dashing.

“But I didn’t even meet him,” Anna protested to no avail.

The next several days passed swiftly, and the pile of transcribed pages grew steadily. Sunday was welcome day of rest.

When Anna returned on Monday, the Abbey held an air of excitement. The earl had at last returned from London. Cook didn’t even look up from the soup she stirred when Anna entered the kitchen, and Mr. Hopple wasn’t there to greet her as had been his daily habit. Anna made her way to the library by herself, expecting to finally meet her employer.

Only to find the room empty.

Oh, well. Anna puffed out a breath in disappointment and set her luncheon basket down on the rosewood desk. She began her work, and time passed, marked only by the sound of her quill scratching across the page. After a while, she felt another presence and looked up. Anna gasped.

An enormous dog stood beside her desk only an arm’s length away. The animal had entered without any sound.

Anna held herself very still while she tried to think. She wasn’t afraid of dogs. As a child, she’d owned a sweet little terrier. But this canine was the largest she’d ever encountered. And unfortunately, it was also familiar. She’d seen the same animal not a week ago, running beside the ugly man who had fallen off his horse on the high road. And if the animal was here now... *oh, dear.* Anna rose, but the dog took a step toward her and she thought better of escaping the library. Instead, she exhaled and slowly sat back down. She and the dog eyed each other. She extended a hand, palm downward, for the dog to sniff. The dog followed her hand’s movement with its gaze, but disdained the gesture.

“Well,” Anna said softly, “if you will not move, sir, I can at least get on with my work.”

She picked up her quill again, trying to ignore the huge animal beside her. After a bit, the dog sat down but still watched her. When the clock over the mantelpiece struck the noon hour, she put down her quill again and rubbed her hand. Cautiously, she stretched her arms overhead, making sure to move slowly.

“Perhaps you’d like some luncheon?” she muttered to the beast. Anna opened the small cloth-covered basket she brought every morning. She thought about ringing for some tea to go with her meal but wasn’t certain the dog would let her move from the desk.

“And if someone doesn’t come to check on me,” she grumbled to the beast, “I shall be glued to the desk all afternoon because of you.”

The basket held bread and butter, an apple, and a wedge of cheese, wrapped in a cloth. She offered a crust of the bread to the dog, but he didn’t even sniff it.

“You are picky, aren’t you?” She munched on the bread herself. “I suppose you’re used to dining on pheasant and champagne.”

The dog kept his own counsel.

Anna finished the bread and started on the apple under the beast’s watchful eyes. Surely if it was dangerous, it would not be allowed to roam freely in the Abbey? She saved the cheese for last. She inhaled as she unwrapped it and savored the pungent aroma. Cheese was rather a luxury at the moment. She licked her lips.

The dog took that moment to stretch out his neck and sniff.

Anna paused with the lump of cheese halfway to her mouth. She looked first at it and then back to the dog. His eyes were liquid brown. He placed a heavy paw on her lap.

She sighed. “Some cheese, milord?” She broke off a piece and held it out.

The cheese disappeared in one gulp, leaving a trail of canine saliva in its former place on her palm. The dog’s thick tail brushed the carpet. He looked at her expectantly.

Anna raised her eyebrows sternly. “You, sir, are a sham.”

She fed the monster the rest of her cheese. Only then did he deign to let her fondle his ears. She was stroking his broad head and telling him what a handsome, proud fellow he was when she heard the sound of booted footsteps in the hallway. She looked up and saw the Earl of Swartingham standing in the doorway, his hot obsidian eyes upon her.

Chapter Three



A powerful prince, a man who feared neither God nor mortal, ruled the lands to the east of the duke. This prince was a cruel man and a covetous one as well. He envied the duke the bounty of his lands and the happiness of his people. One day, the prince gathered a force of men and swept down upon the little dukedom, pillaging the land and its people until his army stood outside the walls of the duke's castle.

The old duke climbed to the top of his battlements and beheld a sea of warriors that stretched from the stones of his castle all the way to the horizon. How could he defeat such a powerful army? He wept for his people and for his daughters, who surely would be ravished and slain. But as he stood thus in his despair, he heard a croaking voice. "Weep not, duke. All is not yet lost..."

—from *The Raven Prince*

Edward halted in the act of entering his library. He blinked. A woman sat at his secretary's desk.

He repressed the instinctive urge to back out a step and double-check the door. Instead he narrowed his eyes, inspecting the intruder. She was a small morsel dressed in brown, her hair hidden by a god-awful frilled cap. She held her back so straight, it didn't touch the chair. She looked like every other lady of good quality but depressed means, except that she was petting—*petting* for God's sake—his great brute of a dog. The animal's head lolled, tongue hanging out the side of his jaw like a besotted idiot, eyes half shut in ecstasy.

Edward scowled at him. "Who're you?" he asked her, more gruffly than he'd meant to.

The woman's mouth thinned primly, drawing his eyes to it. She had the most erotic mouth he'd ever seen on a woman. It was wide, the upper lip fuller than the lower, and one corner tilted. "I am Anna Wren, my lord. What is your dog's name?"

"I don't know." He stalked into the room, taking care not to move suddenly.

"But"—the woman knit her brow—"isn't it your dog?"

He glanced at the dog and was momentarily mesmerized. Her elegant fingers were stroking through the dog's fur.

"He follows me and sleeps by my bed." Edward shrugged. "But he has no name that I know of."

He stopped in front of the rosewood desk. She'd have to move past him in order to escape the room.

Anna Wren's brows lowered disapprovingly. "But he must have a name. How do you call him?"

"I don't, mostly."

The woman was plain. She had a long, thin nose, brown eyes, and brown hair—what he could see of it. Nothing about her was out of the ordinary. Except that mouth.

The tip of her tongue moistened that corner.

Edward felt his cock jump and harden; he hoped to hell she wouldn't notice and be shocked out of her maidenly mind. He was aroused by a frumpy woman he didn't even know.

The dog must've grown tired of the conversation. He slipped from beneath Anna Wren's hand and lay down with a sigh by the fireplace.

"You name him if you must." Edward shrugged again and rested the fingertips of his right hand on

the desk.

The assessing stare she leveled at him stirred a memory. His eyes narrowed. "You're the woman who made my horse shy on the high road the other day."

"Yes." She gave him a look of suspicious sweetness. "I am so sorry you fell off your horse."

Impertinent. "I did not *fall* off. I was unseated."

"Indeed?"

He almost contested that one word, but she held out a sheaf of papers to him. "Would you care to see what I've transcribed today?"

"Hmm," he rumbled noncommittally.

He withdrew his spectacles from a pocket and settled them on his nose. It took a moment to concentrate on the page in his hand, but when he did, Edward recognized the handwriting of his new secretary. He'd read over the transcribed pages the night before, and while he'd approved of the neatness of the script, he'd wondered about the effeminacy of it.

He looked at little Anna Wren over his spectacles and snorted. Not *effeminate*. *Feminine*. Which explained Hopple's evasiveness.

He read a few sentences more before another thought struck him. Edward darted a sharp glance at the woman's hand and saw she wore no rings. Ha. All the men hereabouts were probably afraid to court her.

"You are unwed?"

She appeared startled. "I am a widow, my lord."

"Ah." Then she had been courted and wed, but not anymore. No male guarded her now.

Hard on the heels of that thought was a feeling of ridiculousness for having predatory thoughts about such a drab female. Except for that mouth... He shifted uncomfortably and brought his wandering thoughts back to the page he held. There were no blots or misspellings that he could see. Exactly what he would expect from a small, brown widow. He grimaced mentally.

Ha. A mistake. He glared at the widow over his spectacles. "This word should be *compost*, not *compose*. Can't you read my handwriting?"

Mrs. Wren took a deep breath as if fortifying her patience, which made her lavish bosom expand. "Actually, my lord, no, I can't always."

"Humph," he grunted, a little disappointed she hadn't argued. She'd probably have to take a lot of deep breaths if she were enraged.

He finished reading through the papers and threw them down on her desk, where they slid sideways. She frowned at the lopsided heap of papers and bent to retrieve one that had fluttered to the floor.

"They look well enough." He walked behind her. "I will be working here later this afternoon while you finish transcribing the manuscript thus far."

He reached around her to flick a piece of lint off the desk. For a moment, he could feel her body heat and smell the faint scent of roses wafting up from her warmth. He sensed her stiffen.

He straightened. "Tomorrow I'll need you to work with me on matters pertaining to the estate. I hope that is amenable to you?"

"Yes, of course, my lord."

He felt her twist around to see him, but he was already walking toward the door. "Fine. I have business to attend to before I begin my work here."

He paused by the door. "Oh, and Mrs. Wren?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Yes, my lord?"

“Do not leave the Abbey before I return.” Edward strode into the hallway determined to hunt down and interrogate his steward.

IN THE LIBRARY, Anna narrowed her eyes at the earl’s retreating back. What an overbearing man. He even looked arrogant from the rear, his broad shoulders straight, his head at an imperious tilt.

She considered his last words and turned a puzzled frown on the dog sprawled before the fire. “Why does he think I’d leave?”

The mastiff opened one eye but seemed to know that the question was rhetorical and closed it again. She sighed and shook her head, then drew a fresh sheet of paper from the pile. She was his secretary, after all; she’d just have to learn to put up with the high-handed earl. And, of course, keep her thoughts to herself at all times.

Three hours later, Anna had nearly finished transcribing the pages and had a crick in her shoulder for her efforts. The earl hadn’t yet returned, despite his threat. She sighed and flexed her right hand, then stood. Perhaps a stroll about the room was in order. The dog looked up and rose to follow her. Idly, she trailed her fingers along a shelf of books. They were outsized tomes, geography volumes, judging by the titles on their spines. The books were certainly bigger than the red-bound one she’d looked at last week. Anna paused. She hadn’t had the courage to inspect that little volume since she’d been interrupted by the maid, but now curiosity drove her to the shelf by the bellpull.

There it was, nestled beside its taller mates, just as she’d left it. The slim red book seemed to beckon her. Anna drew it out and opened it to the title page. The print was ornate and barely readable. *The Raven Prince*. There was no author given. She raised her eyebrows and flipped several pages until she came to an illustration of a giant black raven, far larger than the ordinary bird. It stood on a stone wall beside a man with a long white beard and a weary expression on his face. Anna frowned. The raven’s head was tilted as if it knew something the old man didn’t, and its beak was open as though it might—

“What do you have there?”

The earl’s deep tones startled her so badly that Anna did drop the book this time. How had such a large man moved so silently? He crossed the carpet now, with no regard to the muddy tracks he left, and picked up the book at her feet. His expression went flat when he saw the cover. She couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

Then he looked up. “I thought I’d order tea,” he said prosaically. He tugged at the bellpull.

The big dog thrust his muzzle in his master’s free hand. Lord Swarthingham scrubbed the dog’s head and turned to place the book in the drawer of his desk.

Anna cleared her throat. “I was just looking. I hope you don’t mind—”

But the earl waved her to silence as a parlor maid appeared at the door. He spoke to the maid. “Bitsy, have Cook put together a tray with some bread and tea and whatever else she has about.” He glanced at Anna, seemingly as an afterthought. “See if she has some cakes or biscuits, too, will you?”

He hadn’t asked if Anna preferred sweets, so it was just as well that she did. The maid bobbed and hurried out of the room.

Anna pursed her lips. “I really didn’t mean—”

“No matter,” he interrupted. The earl was at his desk, pulling out ink and quills in a haphazard manner. “Look around if you choose. All these books should be put to some use. Although, I don’t know that you’ll find much of interest in them. Mostly boring histories, if I remember correctly, and probably moldy to boot.”

He stopped to peruse a sheet lying on the desktop. She opened her mouth to try again but was distracted by the sight of him stroking the quill while he read. His hands were large and tanned, more so than a gentleman's hands should be. Black hairs grew on the back. The thought popped into her head that he probably had hair on his chest as well. She straightened and cleared her throat.

The earl looked up.

“Do you think ‘Duke’ is a good name?” she asked.

His face blanked for a second before it cleared. He glanced at the dog in consideration. “I don’t think so. He would outrank me.”

The arrival of three maids bearing heavily laden trays saved Anna from making a reply. They set up the tea service on a table near the window and then withdrew. The earl gestured her to the settee on one side while he took a chair on the other.

“Shall I pour?” she asked.

“Please.” He nodded.

Anna served the tea. She thought she felt the earl watching her as she went through the ritual, but when she looked up, his gaze was on his cup. The quantity of the food was intimidating. There was bread and butter, three different jellies, cold sliced ham, pigeon pie, some cheese, two different puddings, small iced cakes, and dried fruit. She filled a plate for the earl with some of each, remembering how hungry a man could be after exercise; then she chose a few pieces of fruit and a cake for herself. Apparently the earl didn’t need conversation during the meal. He methodically demolished the food on his plate.

Anna watched him while she nibbled at a lemon cake.

He lounged in the chair, one leg bent at the knee, the other extended half under the table. Her eyes followed the long length of his mud-splattered jackboots, up muscled thighs to trim hips, over a flat stomach to a chest that widened out to quite broad shoulders for such a lean man. Her gaze skittered to his face. His black eyes gleamed back at her.

She flushed and cleared her throat. “Your dog is so”—she glanced at the homely animal—“*unusual*. I don’t believe I have ever seen one like it before. Where did you get it?”

The earl snorted. “The question should be, where did he get me?”

“I beg your pardon?”

The earl sighed and shifted in his chair. “He turned up one night about a year ago outside my estate in North Yorkshire. I found him along the road. He was emaciated, flea-bitten, and had a rope tangled about his neck and forelegs. I cut the rope off, and the damned animal followed me home.” He scowled at the dog beside his chair.

It wagged its tail happily. The earl lobbed a piece of pie crust, which the dog snapped out of the air. “Haven’t been able to get rid of him since.”

Anna pursed her lips to hide a smile. When she looked up, she thought the earl was staring at her mouth. Oh, dear. Did she have icing on her face? She hastily dabbed at her lips with a finger. “He must be quite loyal to you after you rescued him.”

He grunted. “More like he’s loyal to the kitchen scraps he gets here.” The earl rose abruptly and rang for the tea things to be removed, the dog following his steps. Apparently tea was over.

The rest of the day passed companionably.

The earl wasn’t a silent writer. He muttered to himself and ran his hand through his hair until strands of it became dislodged from his queue and fell around his cheeks in disarray. Sometimes he jumped up to pace the room before returning to his desk to furiously scribble. The dog seemed used to the earl’s compositional style and snored by the fireplace, unperturbed.

When the hall clock chimed the five o'clock hour, Anna started to gather her basket together.

The earl frowned. "Are you leaving already?"

Anna paused. "The hour has struck five, my lord."

He looked surprised, then glanced out the darkening windows. "So it has."

He stood and waited while she finished and then escorted her to the door. Anna was very conscious of his presence beside her as she walked down the hall. Her head didn't quite come to his shoulder, reminding her again of how large a man he was.

The earl scowled when he saw the empty drive outside. "Where is your carriage?"

"I haven't one," she said rather tartly. "I walked from the village."

"Ah. Of course," he said. "Wait here. I'll have my carriage brought round."

Anna started to protest, but he ran down the steps and strode off toward the stables, leaving her with the dog for company. The animal groaned and sat down. She stroked his ears. They waited quietly, listening to the wind stirring the treetops. The dog suddenly pricked up his ears and got to his feet.

The carriage rumbled around the corner and pulled up before the front steps. The earl climbed out and held the door for Anna. Eagerly, the mastiff started down the front steps ahead of her.

Lord Swartingham frowned at the animal. "Not you."

The dog lowered its head and went to stand at his side. Anna placed her gloved hand in the earl's and he helped her into the carriage. For a moment, strong, masculine fingers tightened around hers; then she was released to sit on the red leather seat.

The earl leaned into the carriage. "You needn't bring a lunch tomorrow. You will be dining with me."

He signaled the driver before she could thank him and the carriage lurched forward. Anna craned her neck to look back. The earl still stood before the steps with the huge dog. For some reason, the sight filled her with a melancholy loneliness. Anna shook her head and faced forward again, chastising herself. The earl had no need of her pity.

EDWARD WATCHED THE carriage round the corner. He had an uneasy feeling that he shouldn't let the little widow out of his sight. Her presence beside him in the library that afternoon had been strangely soothing. He grimaced to himself. Anna Wren was not for him. She was of a different class than he, and, moreover, she was a respectable widow from the village. She wasn't a sophisticated society lady who might consider a liaison outside of wedlock.

"Come." He slapped his thigh.

The dog followed him back into the library. The room was cold and dreary again. Somehow it had felt warmer when Mrs. Wren had sat here. He strolled behind her rosewood desk and noticed a handkerchief on the floor. It was white with flowers embroidered in one corner. Violets, perhaps? Hard to tell since they were a bit lopsided. Edward lifted the cloth to his face and inhaled. It smelled of roses.

He fingered the handkerchief and walked to the darkened windows. His trip to London had gone well. Sir Richard Gerard had accepted the suit for his daughter. Gerard was only a baronet, but the family was old and sound. The mother had borne seven children, five of whom had lived to adulthood. Also, Gerard owned a small unentailed estate bordering his own in North Yorkshire. The man balked at adding this land to his eldest daughter's dowry, but Edward felt sure he would come around in time. After all, Gerard would be gaining an earl as a son-in-law. Quite a feather in his cap. As for the girl.

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